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FEMALE VOICES IN VICTORIAN POETRY: BROWNING AND TENNYSON[1]

Abstract: This paper explores the representation of female voices in the poetry of Robert Browning and Lord Alfred Tennyson within the socio-cultural context of the Victorian era. It examines how these poets navigated the complexities of female sexuality and societal norms, often using their works to covertly liberate women's voices. Through a detailed analysis of Browning's two most famous dramatic monologues, "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess", and Tennyson's lyrical poems, the study reveals the paradoxical nature of Victorian ideals that demanded beauty and purity from women while simultaneously suppressing their sexual expression. The paper argues that both poets, despite their different approaches, contributed to the discourse on female liberation by highlighting the struggles and desires of women in a male-dominated society.

Keywords: Victorian era, female sexuality, female body, female voices, Browning, Tennyson.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was characterized by rigid societal norms that diminished the importance of female sexuality, expecting women to embody modesty, purity, and domesticity. Queen Victoria was seen as the ideal Victorian woman, personifying motherhood and domesticity, which further influenced societal expectations of women during the era. Victorian etiquette handbooks, such as Routledge's *Manual of Etiquette* and Florence Hartley's *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette*, provided comprehensive guidelines on how women should behave, emphasizing modesty and quietness. Women exhibiting strong emotions were often labelled as 'hysterical', a term historically linked to the uterus, and were subjected to

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treatments like female genital massage by physicians (see Maines 1999: 7–20). In the Victorian era, societal norms controlled both women's voices and bodies. A paradox existed where Queen Victoria exemplified a plump, full body, yet there was also desire for thinness and a slender waist. This paradox is explored by Anna Krugovoy Silver, who describes the harmful practice of corset-wearing and tight-lacing used by Victorian women to conform to beauty standards. The Victorian beauty myth validated the slim body as a symbol of sexual purity, leading to an "anorexic logic" (Silver 2003: 14) that aimed to destroy the female body. Finally, Victorian literature often linked sex and death, with the vampire figure, doted on by sensually thin vampirellas, becoming a symbol of this connection, representing both physical and spiritual threats (Tracy 1990: 34). Within this contextual and socio-cultural framework, the paper will explore how poets Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson navigated the complexities of representing women, attempting to liberate women's voices even in poems that seemingly deny them the right to speak.

2. LIBERATING WOMEN'S VOICES: BROWNING AND TENNYSON

Robert Browning (1812–1889), sometimes jokingly referred to as Mrs. Browning's husband[2] (Adams 2009: 180), was a foremost Victorian poet, instrumental in developing the dramatic monologue, a form interested in "the dangerous edge of things, / The honest thief, the tender murderer, / The superstitious atheist" (Browning 2013: 306), as he writes in "Bishop Blougram's Apology" (1855). Amidst the growing prestige of the novel in the Victorian era and the rising of the socially oriented poetry, the dramatic monologue, as an "avowedly rhetorical" genre, "offered a model of impersonality, of indirection, of the exploration of psychic and social pathology, and of the many functions of irony" (Adams 2009: 432). The dramatic monologue, as its name suggests, features "a single and singular speaker" (16), who speaks in a dramatically significant moment to an implied audience, explains his current situation, reveals his personality and motives all the while justifying them, which in fact exposes his own faults and shortcomings. The rhetorical nature of the genre allows the writer to disassociate from the speaker, who usually has a monomania on the subject of the poem. Browning uses the form to explore the deepest secrets of one's psyche and bring them to light. Since the

[2] Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) was more popular than her husband at the time. Sean Purchase writes that "at Wordsworth's death in 1850, [*she*] was considered by some to be a suitable laureate for a ruling Queen, but as it turned out it was another man, Alfred Lord Tennyson (1850–92), who was eventually appointed" (Purchase 2006: 181). Like "other successful and progressive female poets", she was also "accused by male critics […] of being 'hysterical'" (182). For more information, see Purchase 2006: 181–185.

speaker is usually a man, it allows one to scrutinize women's position in the male-oriented poetic world and to try to 'hear' their voices.

Browning first successful dramatic monologue, "Porphyria's Lover" (1836), features a speaker who may be viewed as a madman or simply as a man who tries to preserve the moment of perfect love. The poem is thematically divided into two distinct parts. The first half is a seemingly ordinary love poem in which a love-stricken and heartbroken speaker listens to the rain and wind raging outside, matching his own inner turmoil, when Porphyria, his love interest, comes in, shuts "the cold out and the storm" (Browning 2013: 71), and lights a fire that makes not only the cottage warm, but also the speaker's heart. The two lovers share an intimate scene where Porphyria bares her "smooth white shoulder" (72) and puts the speaker's head on it, while covering him with her yellow hair. Although she is the one who initiates intimacy, she also confesses that she is too weak to put her pride aside and give herself to the speaker completely, but "passion sometimes would prevail" (72) and force her to come to him, like she does that night "through wind and rain" (72). It is at this point that the dramatic monologue gains its momentum, as the speaker addresses an implied listener ("Be sure I looked up at her eyes / Happy and proud;" (72)) and starts to reveal his own thoughts. Since Porphyria is the one who 'speaks' while the speaker remains silent, and she is the one who initiates physical contact by putting his arm around her waist and his head on her shoulder, the speaker is finally certain that she loves him. His doubt that has become a certainty marks a reversal that is also a point of no return for the speaker – he suddenly wishes to freeze the moment in time:

> That moment she was mine, – mine, fair,
> Perfectly pure and good: I found
> A thing to do, and all her hair
> In one long yellow string I wound
> Three times her little throat around
> And strangled her. (72–73)

In his analysis of two contemporary sources for the poem[3], Michael Mason argues that "they treat madness as aberration", whereas Browning considers madness "a logical and coherent extension of character" (Mason 1994: 71). For Mason, "Porphyria's Lover" "reflects a contemporary change in psychiatric theory towards a sympathetic and understanding approach to the lunatic" (71) – a view that can be justified by closely examining the aftermath of the murder. The speaker assures the implied listener that Porphyria felt no pain during the strangling and that her dead body still looks alive. He describes a carefully staged scene that takes place at the

[3] "Extracts from Gosschen's Diary no. 1" by John Wilson and *Marcian Colonna* by Bryan Waller Procter (see Browning 2013: 70).

moment of speaking: *her* head is now on *his* shoulder, a smile lingering on her cold face because he believes she has finally got what she has always wanted: himself. Rather than identifying the speaker as a madman, one could deem him an extremely vain man who thinks that Porphyria's utmost will was to possess him simply because she came to see him in a stormy night and was vocal about her physical needs. What she could not have known was how he, as a Victorian man, would understand her words and deeds: "Porphyria's love: she guessed not how / Her darling one wish would be heard" (73). Browning anticipates the sentiment expressed by Oscar Wilde in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898), in which he inverts Shakespeare's line from *The Merchant of Venice* ("BASSANIO: Do all men kill the things they do not love?" (IV, 1, 66) (Shakespeare 2002: 233)) and asserts instead that "each man kills the thing he loves" (Wilde 1898). The motive for the murder may be found in the Victorian etiquette, according to which beauty and purity are the ultimate goals in a woman's life, so to preserve them, death may be the solution. The end of the poem is another enigma. The murderous lover sits with the girl's corpse all night long, still unpunished for the heinous deed: "And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!" (Browning 2013: 73). He is not afraid of earthly laws, but at the same time he thinks he has escaped God's wrath, who is not a voyeur like the implied listeners.

"The sympathetic and understanding approach" to the murderer rests partly in the fact that the lover remains enamoured with Porphyria, the woman he has just killed, like the speaker from Browning's most famous dramatic monologue, "My Last Duchess" (1842). The identity of this monologue's speaker remains uncertain, but it has been widely accepted that he represents Alfonso II (1533–1598), fifth Duke of Ferrara, who "married the 14-year-old Lucrezia de' Medici in 1558; she died in 1561, and there were suspicions (almost certainly groundless) that she had been poisoned" (Browning 2013: 197). The poem is written in heroic couplets, but Browning manages to elevate the rhyme and make the Duke's language seem "so powerfully colloquial that first-time readers almost never notice that he speaks in rhymed couplets" (Adams 2009: 47). Adams claims that the Duke's "seemingly effortless urbanity […] gradually discloses a monomaniacal, ultimately murderous obsession with his own authority" (46). Unlike Porphyria's lover, the Duke of Ferrara does not act in the spur of the moment but acts deliberately in order to stop what he deems humiliation ("Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?" (Browning 2013: 199)) and to prevent further change of his perfect young wife. On the other hand, like Porphyria's lover, the Duke wants to freeze the perfect love in time because a dead love is better than one that would inevitably change over time. In "My Last Duchess", one does not hear the Duchess' voice since she is already dead, but "in an important sense, she lives on" (Adams 2009: 47) in the painting that the Duke reveals to his visitor. The portrait of the Duchess is the central image of the poem, but also "radically ambiguous" according to Adams: "it captures her in the sense that it imprisons her, and yet it also is faithful to her" (47).

It preserves her youthful beauty for eternity, thus answering to the demands of the Victorian age, but at the same time, because of the Duke's attitude towards it, the portrait becomes a silent symbol of "Victorian critical reflection" (47).

"My Last Duchess" is noticeably more dramatic in form than "Porphyria's Lover", as the Duke addresses an implied listener from the very beginning of the poem when he shows him the painting: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive" (Browning 2013: 198). He asks the listener to sit and look at her, proud at the wonder of the painting. She is "reduced to an artifact" (Adams 2009: 46) because this is the only way she can be fully possessed. Once he has the 'Sir's' attention, the Duke may proceed with his histrionic performance: he describes his late wife's habit of being "too easily impressed" by other people's compliments, of liking "whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (Browning 2013: 199). His speech does not portray him as a jealous husband, but rather a self-absorbed egomaniac who did not even want to chide the Duchess for her behaviour ("E'en then would be some stooping, and I chuse / Never to stoop" (199–200)), but instead decided to have her killed[4]: "This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" (200). For him, the Duchess in the painting is the equivalent of the living Duchess ("There she stands / As if alive" (200)), which contributes to the idea that the idealized image of a woman is preferred to the real woman who is sentimental, vocal about her needs, and fragile. The end of the poem reveals the identity of the implied listener as an envoy in the negotiations over the Duke's second marriage, which makes one wonder why the Duke would want to reveal his murderous past to his future in-laws. As though making one final threat, the Duke shows the envoy a bronze statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse as his special rare piece of art, which may symbolize the way in which he is accustomed to taming and silencing his women. Hilary Schor underscores "the difficulty of both writing and silencing female desire" (Schor 1990: 163) in the peculiarly morbid and sexually tensed world of early Victorian literature. For Schor, these silent women "become both more perfect images of themselves and images of poetic creation, [*and*] at the same time […] they stand in for the objectification and commodification of art itself" (163), also to be seen in Tennyson's poems.

Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) were seen as rivals throughout their careers (see Carter, McRae 2001: 265), but it was Browning who was "the greatest virtuoso of the dramatic monologue" (Adams 2009: 45), although some of Tennyson's early poems, such as "The Lotus Eaters" (1832), foreshadowed the new genre, "built on the interplay of voice and an implied audi-

[4] The editors of Robert Browning's *Selected Poems* add a note to this line that provides Browning's thoughts on it and his own intentions: "Yes, I meant that the commands were that she be put to death." And then, after a pause, he added, with a characteristic dash of expression, and as if the thought had just started up in his mind, "Or he might have had her shut up in a convent" (H. Corson, *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry* [3rd ed., Boston 1903] p. viii). Cited in Browning 2013: 200.

ence […] in which identity is not merely social but is quite insistently a rhetorical effect" (44). Within the genre of dramatic monologue, Tennyson's "Ulysses" (1842) remains his best achievement and one of the most relevant works of the Victorian age. However, the female voices that Tennyson tried to 'liberate' from the constraints of the age are to be found in his lyrical poems. In *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and *Poems* (1832), there are several lyrics now designated 'lady poems', inspired by Shakespeare's, Spenser's, and classical heroines: "Claribel", "Lilian", "Isabel", "Madeline", "Adeline", "Mariana", etc. Until recently, these poems were mostly disregarded or berated by critics, yet today the 'lady poems' are seen as embedding Tennyson's "enduring concerns", one of which is the "feminization of lyric and literary culture" (Peterson 2009: 25). As Adams reminds us, Tennyson's poetry was described by Alfred Austin as 'feminine' in his *Poetry of the Period* (1870): "The most unreasonable of his worshippers would not dare for one moment […] to call him masculine"[5] (Adams 2009: 330). The Victorians feared 'unmanly art' because they saw it as a personal failing and "a symptom of cultural decline" (330). Tennyson's close friend A. H. Hallam, whose untimely death inspired *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850) that secured Tennyson's position as the new poet laureate, defended his friend by saying that he was not a poet of reflection, but a poet of sensation, following in the line of Shelley and Keats (see Adams 2009: 39–40, and Carter, McRae 2001: 88).

The main product of Tennyson's emotive (rather than intellectual) poetry is his characteristic melancholy, felt already in his early poems about "a feminine or feminized being longing for release from isolation or abandonment" (Adams 2009: 41). "Mariana" and "The Lady of Shalott" serve as good examples of the poet's attempts to 'free' the titular women from the prisons of their minds, yet these are not the only poems in which the female desire is made undesirable by either men or the society. *Idylls of the King* (1859–1885) chronicle the effects of the sinful queen's wayward sexuality, making it the cause of the downfall of Camelot. In the idyll "Guinevere", King Arthur bids farewell to the Queen, and even though he eventually blesses her and forgives her, he spends most of his time reproaching her:

> Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.
> I hold that man the worst of public foes
> Who either for his own or children's sake.
> To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife
> Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house;
> For being through his cowardice allowed
> Her station, taken everywhere for pure,
> She like a new disease, unknown to men,
> Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd… (Tennyson 1917)

[5] Adams cites Alfred Austin (1870), *The Poetry of the Period*, London: Bentley.

Not only is Guinevere a sinful and shameful woman for cheating on him, but she is also a cunning woman, an ever-lurking menace to naive men, a venereal 'disease' that ruined a whole kingdom. According to Adams, this "fantasy is central to Victorian culture [*since*] it is hard to overstate the power of domesticity as an ideal of perfect understanding and fidelity, and of feminine devotion to the needs of men and children" (Adams 2009: 196). Since she failed to control her desire, Guinevere must remain in her chosen prisons – the convent and her own mind – so as not to infect other men. Here Tennyson follows the Victorian fantasy, but in "Oenone" (1832), for example, he gives voice to a woman who suffers because of her *husband's* failure to control his desire. While Paris and Helen of Troy inspired many literary works as the central figures in Greek mythology whose love affair was the immediate cause of the Trojan War, Oenone was largely forgotten at the time Tennyson gave her voice. She laments her fate by saying: "I alone awake. / My eyes are full of tears, my heart of love, / My heart is breaking, and my eyes are dim, / And I am all aweary of my life" (Tennyson 2003: 65). She describes the contest for the Hesperian apple and how she now suffers because of Aphrodite's promise to Paris to give him the "fairest and most loving wife in Greece", which makes her wonder: "Fairest – why fairest wife? am I not fair? / My love hath told me so a thousand times" (69). She ends her lament with a conviction that she is imprisoned in hell: "wheresoe'er I am by night and day / All earth and air seem only burning fire" (71–72).

The predecessor of "Oenone" is "Mariana", published in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830). This figure of unrequited longing, living in "a world of haunting abandonment" (Adams 2009: 38) was inspired by Shakespeare's Mariana from *Measure for Measure*, alluded to in the epigraph ('Mariana in the moated grange'[6]). In the play, Mariana reaches an uneasy truce with her treacherous fiancé, Angelo, but Tennyson chooses to depict her prior to their reunion to show "domesticity […] emptied of all solace" (38). Much like Guinevere and Oenone, Mariana lives in a 'prison' of her "dreamy house", waiting hopelessly for her lover to return, in her delusion seeing old faces and hearing old footsteps and voices:

> All day within the dreamy house,
> The doors upon their hinges creak'd;
> The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
> Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd,
> Or from the crevice peer'd about.
> Old faces glimmer'd thro' the doors,
> Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
> Old voices called her from without.
> She only said, 'My life is dreary,

[6] Allusion to the Duke's words from *Measure for Measure* (III, 1, 265–266): "There at the moated / grange resides this dejected Mariana" (Shakespeare 2002: 468).

He cometh not,' she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!' (Tennyson 2003: 32)

Unlike Oenone, who delivers most of her poem, Mariana is heard only in the repeating refrain in which she alternately laments over her dreary days, nights, and life, only to conclude in the last stanza that her lover will not come, so she pleads God for her death. Schor comments that Tennyson "seems to focus on passive women […] frozen in their situations", but these "abandoned women have a fierce sexuality not found in the others", which in Mariana's case lies in her "obsessive desire" (Schor 1990: 163–164). In both poems the women long for death (Oenone repeatedly says "Dear mother Ida, harken ere I die", and Mariana cries "I would that I were dead"), but they are not suicidal, as Sylvia Manning explains:

> They do not have death in their power just as they do not have sex. They speak of death in tonalities shaped by sexual desire, until the two objects of longing – the male and death – become fused. Sex and death, courted in rapid interchange, are deeply implicated in each other, and insofar as men exist in these poems only as absences or as the indifferent, sexuality and death constitute a thoroughly female subject (Manning 1990: 200).

Conversely, in "The Lady of Shalott" (1832; 1842) the absence of a male figure does not prefigure death, its presence does. The poem was originally published in the 1832 *Poems* and was later revised and published in the 1842 *Poems*. The differences between the two versions are subtle but relevant because they change the overall tone of the poem. In both versions, the first part describes the silent isle of Shalott overlooking Camelot. There, surrounded by "four gray walls and four gray towers" (Tennyson 2003: 52) lives the Lady of Shalott, who is often heard singing by the reapers in Camelot. The second part presents the Lady's state and her curse, for she must weave her magic web all the time and never look down on Camelot. Hers is a world of shadows and mirror images since she is only allowed to observe Camelot in a mirror. She watches both sad and happy scenes, funerals and lovers, which makes her confess that she is "half sick of shadows" (54). While the lyrics of the first two parts of the poem differ slightly, the third part that announces the arrival of "bold Sir Lancelot" (54) is the same in both versions. Tennyson makes sure that Lancelot is heard before he is seen by the Lady of Shalott: his bridle bells ring merrily, his armour rings as he rides, his "war-horse" (55) is heard treading, and he begins to sing just before his image flashes into her mirror:

She left the web, she left the loom
She made three paces thro' the room
She saw the water-flower bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,

She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott (55).

Lancelot's arrival stirs the forbidden desire in the Lady and although she "knows not what the curse may be" (53), again desire and death are deeply implicated in each other, so she is doomed to die. The most significant difference in the two versions of the poem comes next, in the final part. It begins with the description of the Lady finding a boat beneath a willow – a symbol of mourning *and* rebirth. She writes her name on the boat, lies down, floats down to Camelot and starts "chanting her deathsong" (1832) / "singing her last song" (1842). As her pale corpse floats between the houses in Camelot, people gather to see who it is. In the 1832 version, they find a letter on her breast with a puzzling inscription: "'The web was woven curiously, / The charm is broken utterly, / Draw near and fear not, – this is I, / The Lady of Shalott'". The 1842 version, however, reintroduces Lancelot, giving him a more prominent (and sinister) role as he comments on her beauty:

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott" (57).

The poem lends its musicality to the B rhyme that is repeated throughout the poem, Camelot–Shalott, which also signifies that the Lady may be isolated in the tower because of social restraints. Given that 'Lancelot' also rhymes with Camelot and Shalott, and that the Lady dies because she could not resist looking at him, it may be surmised that the male factor together with the strict societal demands both contribute to her ill fate. Before she looks down on the 'real' Camelot, the Lady of Shalott knows only its inverted form that she weaves into her magic tapestry, which may symbolize a work of fiction because of its 'false' content. She wants 'reality' and dies because of it, only to become an object of art herself, to be admired in death for her beauty only. Like the abandoned Mariana and Oenone, the Lady of Shallot does not have sex in her power, but unlike them she has death: "Seized by sexual desire, she hastens to her death" (Manning 1990: 201). Ultimately, she dies willingly if only to have her desire fulfilled for a brief moment.

3. CONCLUSION

Within the constraints of strict Victorian societal norms, two of the most famous poets of the time subtly explored the consequences of female desire. In his two famous dramatic monologues, Browning reveals the complexities of male control over female desire. The form of the dramatic monologue enables him "to explore extreme and usually extremely morbid states of mind" while not allowing the reader "to identify the speaker with Browning the author" because the dramatic monologue acts "as a kind of a mask [*that*] allows the writer to explore the human soul without the soul-searching being too directly personal" (Carter, McRae 2001: 266). In contrast to the 'impersonal' Browning stands the too personal Tennyson, whose lyrical poems depict women's longing and isolation: he positions his female figures in constrained spaces and presents their desires as something destructive or repressed. In reading these selected poems together, one can see that although Browning and Tennyson use different literary forms to grapple with the complexities of the Victorian age, they both draw attention to female suffering within the confines of Victorian domestic and social norms, and through the exploration of male power dynamics.

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ЖЕНСКИ ГЛАСОВИ У ВИКТОРИЈАНСКОЈ ПОЕЗИЈИ: БРАУНИНГ И ТЕНИСОН

Резиме: У раду се критички сагледава представљање женских гласова у поезији Роберта Браунинга и Лорда Алфреда Тенисона у односу на друштвено-културолошки контекст викторијанског доба. Рад истражује начине на који су ови песници успели да помире комплексне односе између женске сексуалности и викторијанских друштвених норми, најчешће тако што су у својим песмама путем пажљиво одабраних песничких слика кришом ослобађали женске гласове. Кроз детаљну анализу Браунингових најпознатијих монолога, „Порфиријин љубавник" и „Моја последња војвоткиња", као и одабраних Тенисонових лирских песама, рад разоткрива парадокс у сржи викторијанских идеалâ, који су од жена захтевали лепоту и чедност, док су истовремено гушили женску сексуалност. У раду се закључује да су оба песника, упркос различитим приступима, дала допринос ослобађању женских гласова тако што су својим песмама скренули пажњу на напоре жена да своју жељу изразе у друштву којим доминира мушки принцип.

Кључне речи: викторијанско доба, женска сексуалност, женско тело, женски гласови, Браунинг, Тенисон.